

## Interview with Elbridge Durbrow

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The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR ELBRIDGE DURBROW

Interviewed by: Ted Gittinger

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*Q: Mr. Ambassador, were you given a briefing, a formal briefing or informal, before you went to Saigon in 1957?*

DURBROW: Oh, yes. I came back to Washington for about three or four weeks, I've forgotten how long. I'd been in Vietnam before, because I was stationed in Malaysia. I'd been up there [to visit] my predecessor, Freddie Reinhardt, [who is] a very close friend of mine, an old Moscow callow colleague. I'd been up to Saigon on a long visit one time, so I knew the situation up there, the physical situation. Then I came back and I was briefed in the department and in the Pentagon and in the CIA and everything else, a full briefing. I went out there in March of 1957.

*Q: What were your expectations that you derived from the briefing? What sort of situation did you expect? What kind of problems did you expect to encounter?*

DURBROW: Well, one way or the other, I was not surprised by anything for the simple reason that I spent most of my career dealing with communists. I went on my first mission to Moscow in 1934, was there for four years. I had gone into Moscow again during the war on a short TDY, about four months. Then I came back again to Moscow in 1946-48 as the deputy chief of mission there dealing with the Kremlin boys. I dealt with them during

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the war when I was with the East European Division. I had been in Italy, a big Communist Party there; I'd been in Poland way back when before that, so I thought I knew something about the way they operate. Nobody does really, but you get a better idea if you've been there. So I wasn't surprised. I knew what we were fighting, which is something I don't think they understand today, really. The American public and the press doesn't, I don't think. So therefore the public should learn much about it, what a war of national liberation is all about.

That's a technique that the Soviets developed a long time ago. They've perfected it, and Vietnam is one of the best examples of it. Our press, in Vietnam particularly but elsewhere even before that, they think this is a local insurgency, a local civil war, grow like Topsy in whatever country it is, and they're fighting for their freedoms against the oppressive government or the imperialist Americans, whatever you want to call it. So, in that sense, I suppose that's one of the reasons why I was sent there, because I had had experience in that sort of thing before. So I wasn't surprised in any way at all.

The problem was that they were trying to take over the country by subversive methods and terrorists. That's one thing I think that is not understood at all, is that a war of national liberation is a well worked out technique, and only one of the tools of that technique is terrorism. We're talking so much about terrorism today, and terrorism, well, that's part of it, no question about it. But I don't think anybody else has any—El Salvador is a war of national liberation. It's not a local civil war down there. Nicaragua is the same thing. Angola was the same thing. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Cuba, South Yemen, they're all caused by national liberation. I tried to bring that out in that paper I gave you the other day.

*Q: Let me ask you about President [Ngo Dinh] Diem. Now, when you went to Vietnam in 1957, what was the generally held view of Diem and what he had done in Vietnam up till that time?*

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DURBROW: Well, his image was going up quite well by that time. Freddie Reinhardt, who had also done the Moscow tour and knew the situation, was there when he took over and he helped him to get started. We all did or our government did. So by 1956, 1957, he'd beaten down the Binh Xuyen in the town there in the 1955 war, fighting right in the streets. On the other attempts by the two to three thousand well-trained communist guerrillas that they'd left behind after the 1954 accords... They weren't supposed to, of course. And Hanoi hoped and expected [he would be defeated]. Diem wasn't too well known, he didn't have too much of a following in the country. He'd been exiled and out and that sort of thing. They hoped that by terrorism, subversion, propaganda, and intimidation that they could topple that government without having to go to an all-out military effort.

But by 1956 Diem had calmed those things down pretty well, beaten the Binh Xuyen. The Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai sects were collaborating with him. In the time beginning in 1956 he started to rebuild the country, the countryside and things of that kind. With our AID program and our assistance, we worked on a plan for land reform, which turned out to be quite a good one, as a matter of fact, eventually. As I remember the figures, there were about six hundred thousand acres taken from the larger landlords and divided up into seven acre or three hectare plots for about a hundred and twenty-five thousand families, mostly in the Delta, because that's where it was easier to do and where the best productivity on this land was.

*Q: Let me ask you to follow on a line connected with that. Now, there was a lot of criticism then and later on the subject of land reform in South Vietnam, at least there was in the press. And there was some, I understand, among some members of the mission, too. Did you know Wolf Ladejinsky?*

DURBROW: Ladejinsky, yes. I knew him very well. He's the guy that put it in. He's the guy that worked it up.

*Q: Didn't something come up between him and Diem later?*

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DURBROW: Yes, but it wasn't over the land reform.

*Q: Oh, it wasn't over land reform?*

DURBROW: No, no. Wolf Ladejinsky had done a wonderful job in Japan, you know, before that. He got them to become eventually self-sufficient in their rice production. He'd worked in the Philippines and he came down to Vietnam. And Wolf did a very fine job basically in that field and other agricultural developments, helping with the rubber and new plants and that sort of thing. But there was no [disagreement there]. They fought over other things later, because he became a very intimate adviser to Diem. On some of the things I worked with Wolf, too. I'd only maybe come into it later, I'll bring it up now, though. You probably have seen the Pentagon Papers or somewhere else or [David] Halberstam's book [The Best and the Brightest] about the instructions I asked for in September 1960 to help Diem to get a better hold on things and get things going in a better direction, more democratic and that sort of thing. Well, Wolf was all for me on that sort of business because the land reform was going great guns by then. So Wolf was a great help, but he was advising on all sorts of other things besides land by that time. So when the break came—I've forgotten—he and I talked it over, but it wasn't a “throw him out of the country in twenty-four hours” sort of thing. Just a disagreement—

*Q: Falling out.*

DURBROW: —falling out, yes. And he went on to India from there. But the land reform, I tell you, was a darn good success, six hundred thousand acres, a hundred and twenty-five thousand families. I visited many times, saw the things and we did the cadastral work and a lot of the other stuff to help them out. It couldn't be done in the mountainous part of Vietnam; it could be done along the coast, the flatlands. But Diem founded these new villages as a program to get somebody to go up into the mountains to relieve the population concentration on the coast, particularly up the coast from the Delta. That didn't work too well, but it got the people—

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*Q: Was that the relocation program?*

DURBROW: Yes, the relocation program, yes.

*Q: What was wrong with that? You said it didn't work too well.*

DURBROW: It didn't work for lots of reasons. First of all, who started it or whether it was a rumor or not [I don't know], but I think it was believed by most of the people. It always starts as a rumor, but by the time I got there it was believed that if you were a lowlander and you went up in the mountains, you were going to get some disease. You couldn't [survive], you're all going to die, your whole family's going to die. There were mosquitos or some kind of bugs up there, I've forgotten what the cause was. But you were up there and you were going to get tuberculosis and all sorts of things could happen to you. So there was [one reason]. All people who have ancestor worship as their basic religion, and the Vietnamese do—it's not a Buddhist country at all, by the way, not at all; it's not what the press tried to tell us over here—they want to be near their ancestors. So their graves were down on the lowlands and all that sort of thing, so it was quite a wrench.

Diem didn't use force, but he used a lot of persuasion to get them to go up there, inducements, too. They gave them this plot of land and they cleared one hectare completely for them, gave them the bamboo and other things to build their huts with, or thatch and that sort of thing. We helped them work out various crops that would grow in the highlands in that type of soil. So it didn't work very well because people didn't want to be moved. Now, if you were down there in the Delta and you were going to get this piece of land you had lived right next door to for a long, long time, why, that's home. So that was one of the main reasons, as I understand it, that it wasn't working.

*Q: Was there any friction with the Montagnards over this?*

DURBROW: Oh, yes, sure there was, naturally, because the Montagnards are a very interesting people. I spent a long time up with them. All through that whole part

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of Southeast Asia, not just in Vietnam, they have this economy they've developed themselves, indigenous. In order to make this—they had no fertilizers at all, didn't know about animal fertilizers or anything like that. They had very few animals, as a matter of fact. They burned the forest down, and the ashes, the stumps and all to get humus and fertilize the land so they could plant their little crops and move on to mountain rice and that sort of thing. They'd move on and burn another big area down, and Diem said, "You can't do that anymore. You can burn these places down and that place, but this is a new village area, so you can't do that." And that caused friction, naturally.

There was always friction, of course, between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese. They're animists, among other things, and they're very primitive people, but very friendly. I stayed up in camps with them and so forth. They, knowing we weren't Vietnamese and we weren't French—although the French got along with them better than the Vietnamese did. The French realized their problems when they built their coffee plantations up there and tea and other plantations, and they paid attention to local taboos and that sort of business and got along better than the Vietnamese did. So there was friction with the Montagnards, yes.

*Q: Did you go hunting when you were up there? I understand you hunted.*

DURBROW: Oh, yes. I didn't get my real spurs as an ambassador, because I never got a tiger. My predecessors had, and Freddie Reinhardt's wife got a tiger before he did, incidentally. So I went off, I think I added them up one time, anyway, about thirty-nine days I spent in the jungle, which was very, very interesting. I'd been through a jungle, you know, a rain forest here and there down in Haiti or somewhere like that, but to spend four or five days up there in the jungle camping out under a canopy of three trees, when our troops got in there, I had a very definite idea of the problem of how the local guerrillas can hide. From twenty feet away you can't see them, you can't smell them, you can't do anything, and this canopy of three tiers of trees in the jungle made it very easy to hide in. Orange—was it called?

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*Q: Agent Orange?*

DURBROW: Agent Orange had to be used.

But I enjoyed that. I always liked to camp. I did in Moscow, I went down the Caucasus and had an eighty-day horseback trip up in the Caucasus. That sort of thing relaxes me, so I did quite a bit of that. I didn't get my tiger.

*Q: Well, I'm sorry. (Laughter) DURBROW: Tigers are an endangered species now, I'm glad I didn't.*

It was a very sporting thing the way they do it, though. One way, they dig a hole in the ground and they get some new boughs, branches, cut down just from the local scenery so it looks like home. They make a little top in this thing and they leave a hole, get a dead buffalo or a big deer or something down there that's at least five days putrid. So the tiger finally gets a—a tiger, I understand, has a very bad [sense of smell], sensitive ear, sight, but not too sensitive a scent. So they' try to put the carcass down near a path to a waterhole, hoping they'll smell it and find it and come back for a meal. So you sit there for five or six hours on end, and you can't talk to your partner. You wait for the tiger to come and you have this little peephole and he can walk right on top of you. He's more scared than you are, so it wouldn't be too bad. I got two shots, wounded one and goofed on the other one, so I'm not a hunter.

*Q: Well, I heard you were. I heard differently.*

Regarding the military situation in South Vietnam, what kind of threat did you perceive as not most likely but perhaps likely? We've been criticized for paying too much attention to a possible Korean-style invasion. Now, that, of course, comes later. What about in 1957? What were your views then?

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DURBROW: Freddie Reinhardt before me warned me about it and it turned out to be 100 per cent true. One of our biggest problems was going to be with General [Samuel T.] Williams. He was a nice guy and all that sort of thing, but he and I just didn't get along and Freddie didn't get along with him either. He had no respect for civilians. He knew how to run a military outfit and we had nothing to do with it, so he thought. He had been a private, got in World War I, came up through the ranks, became a very good operator in the field of various types, infantry man and then a tank man. By the time I got there—and Freddie had been fighting it, too—he was building this Vietnamese army of ten small divisions with tanks and they didn't have very many personnel carriers then, but there were a few of those, as if they were going to come down the main roads in a column of squads or column of tanks. Having been in Malaysia, I knew what the British did down there to get rid of the communist insurgents there. When you worked in the jungle, you had to put this, that, infiltration and all the rest, cutting off food and whatnot. I had a pretty good idea of what—and I knew [Sir Robert] Thompson down there, too, who set up their whole operation, came up to Vietnam later.

*Q: Isn't that R. G. K. Thompson?*

DURBROW: Yes, yes.

*Q: Okay.*

DURBROW: The great guerrilla warfare expert, whom I saw in Hamburg last June, who's quite a guy still.

So I had a very definite idea that this column of squads thing coming down the main road across the DMZ, maybe they were going to do that, but you had to expect them to do otherwise. Once you got in the jungle and lived, saw how it is to get through the jungle—we had jeeps of course, we had to cut down trees to get into our campsites, the roads were few and far between. We built some good roads, but they were just the main arteries,



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the Jersey Turnpike, so to speak. In the mountains you've got to go on foot or pack animal or something. So I was already set for a problem with my friend General Williams and we had some real knockdown, drag-out fights. I was fortunate, Eisenhower had put out an executive order—I've forgotten, it was 1956 anyway, 10566 or something else like that—which laid down the fact that the ambassador in the country was the personal representative and was responsible to the president and therefore he was the principal representative of the United States government in that country and he would control all of our operations.

*Q: Why would he find it necessary to say that?*

DURBROW: Well, because of just the problem I was having, because it was done before I got there. I knew about it from Malaysia, but [it happened] all over the darn place. Remember, we didn't do a doggone thing in foreign affairs until we got hit at Pearl Harbor. I mean that categorically from World War I. I mean, we had a neutrality act and we had very small embassies. We dido very fine reporting, I hope, on what we thought was going to happen to that Czech government that might fall in two months, but if they fell, we didn't do anything about it. [it] didn't make much difference except you got good marks for predicting they would fall, and whether the right guys came back in or not was not our business. We were neutral.

So we won World War II and mostly by ourselves. We were a side issue in World War I, basically. We helped, though. So all of a sudden these military guys were all over the world, bases here and bases there, Vietnams, MAAGs all over the place. We knew how to run the railroad, we won the war, we know how to do it, and so forth. You guys, you can run the political stuff and talk about the elections, that sort of thing, but this other business, how to protect the country's our business. I don't know exactly why, I'm sure something along that line, because I'd run into that before.

*Q: So it was not uncommon for MAAG and the embassy to have their friction?*

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DURBROW: Oh gosh, yes. The most interesting guy I did [encounter] before that [from] my experience in Moscow was Bedell Smith. He was Ike's chief of staff, of course, and he was the ambassador, and I happened to be the number-two guy. There was a fellow named Macon [?], General Macon, a hell of a nice fellow, had a fine record in World War II and he was a very fine tank commander and so forth. He ran the MAAG, the military section of the embassy. It wasn't called MAAG there, but it was the same thing. They had twenty or thirty officers. Of course in the Soviet Union the secrecy and the surveillance was quite different than it was in Vietnam. But nevertheless, here Macon knew who Bedell was, of course, naturally, but he thought he could run his little bailiwick by himself, but I can tell you Bedell Smith made sure that didn't happen. Maybe Bedell got Ike to write that executive order, I don't know. Because Bedell had quite a battle, really; they just told him to shut up or "I'll get you kicked out of here. I'll call my friend [George] Marshall and you'll get out."

*Q: I have heard from other sources that it was not uncommon for MAAGs to have their problems with the embassy and vice versa.*

DURBROW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. There's no question about it. But fortunately this executive order came out, so one of my first jobs was to draft my own order based on that, how all the various [groups], the CIA, the MAAG, the agricultural boys in the AID program, would coordinate their operations this way, and no basic policy change will be sent out to Washington without my knowing about it. If I agreed, I'd endorse it; if I didn't, I would say I wouldn't endorse it.

Well, Williams didn't understand English or something because I caught him right on, I mean I learned about it through the channels. The grapevine works better than telegraph lines sometimes. So I had to tell him to come over there. I said, "This order means what it says. Now if you want to go against what I'm suggesting or putting down as the policy of the embassy, fine, go ahead, but let me know about it so I can say to Washington why I disagree with what you're doing." And we had one thing in about 1959, I guess. I had

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a military attach# as well on my staff. You see, the MAAG was a separate agency. And Colonel [Richard H.] Comstock came and said, "Mister Ambassador, I was just talking to my friend Colonel somebody of the Vietnamese Army who I've been working with very closely, trying to help out on getting the special forces camps going, guerrilla training of these special forces—"

*Q: Is this Vietnamese special forces?*

DURBROW: Yes. Yes. And I'd worked like the dickens to get that through and Williams got orders from Washington to go ahead and do it, and he wasn't doing hardly a thing about it when I got there. Freddie Reinhardt had tried to get it done, too, but he just resisted, so Freddie had helped me on getting started on the thing. I tried to follow through.

*Q: Do you know what he had against that idea?*

DURBROW: "They can't handle that. They're going to come down the main road. I know how to handle that, we can handle that. There'll be a few snipers here, there, and that sort of thing." It was obvious. As I said, I'd had the experience, I'd gone up into the jungle in Malaysia with [the British]. The British were very kind to me there as a friendly representative. I'd gone on treks through the jungle with the officers up there on the inspection trips, so I had some idea what the problem was in Malaysia and it's the same kind of climate and place. But Williams just didn't want to believe it. So anyway, without telling me, Williams canceled the arrangements made with the Vietnamese to set up five or six—I've forgotten—special forces training camps. They had one pilot plant already going. So from Colonel Comstock I learned this thing, and I had one hell of a fight. I had to go right back to Washington and say, "Here it is, boys." And they put it back on again. But he resisted from well before I got there this idea that there was going to be guerrilla-type war, not a trench warfare, World War I, or maneuvers as in World War II or anything of that kind.

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You're going to bring up [Lionel] McGarr later. Well, fortunately, McGarr who came much later—I might confess to one of my many mistakes in life, I made two of them in one place, in the same place and at the same time with the same person. It was about General Williams. It was discovered in the archives of the Pentagon that General Williams, quite patriotically, he wasn't wrong, because as a kid he'd lied about his age.

*Q: When would he—?*

DURBROW: In 1917.

*Q: Oh, when he enlisted. Oh, I see. I see.*

DURBROW: He was not seventeen, he was only sixteen, but he wanted to go in for good, patriotic reasons, so give the guy full credit. They caught up with him later, so all of a sudden his time of station in the army on active duty came up.

*Q: A year early.*

DURBROW: A year earlier than was known to be. His record was still the seven-teen-year-old getting into the army. So I got word from the Pentagon through the State Department that General Williams would have to retire in a short time, but was there anybody I knew that I wanted, wanted to make some suggestions, something else like that, and please inform President Diem to this effect, he was going to be retired because of age. And I told Diem—of course Williams knew about it—and Diem just begged and plead and screamed because he and Williams got along very, very well. He liked to have lots of tanks and armies for his parades, I guess, I don't know why. And Williams had won his confidence before I got there, of course, and he counted on him for advice and things of that kind in the military field. I told him that I was afraid that it was a pretty strict rule, but there can be exceptions made. So Diem asked me specifically and officially on his behalf to ask that Williams be extended for at least one year. Well, I was having my battles with Williams, but I wasn't worried about that. I like battles. So Diem wanted it, and we were trying to do the

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right things in the military, and by the way, by that time Williams is coming around to doing a little bit of this special warfare stuff and guerrilla warfare and jungle training and that sort of thing. So I had a bird in my hand, so why not keep him there, he might be going in the right direction. So we got an extra year.

Then a year after that along came Anderson, who was under secretary of state, whatever he was—the cotton Anderson in Texas. What's his name? I know him damn well. Bill Anderson, was it? Anderson, Clayton Cotton Company.

*Q: Yes, I know who you're talking about, but I can't call it to mind either.*

DURBROW: That's the Anderson. I've forgotten his first name now. [Dillon Anderson?] But anyway, he was on his way to Malaysia to represent the President at the time that they got their independence from the British in 1958, 1959 I guess it was. Anderson stopped over to see Diem and check on what was going on over there for President Eisenhower. Diem got to him and said Williams told Diem that he was going to have to retire definitely this time unless some special arrangements were made. So Williams didn't tell me this; I knew it was true, but I didn't know what he was doing. But he got Diem to tell Anderson—didn't tell me—but to tell the President that he wants him to stay on another year. Fortunately, Anderson immediately did the right thing for our country and for the guy who was supposed to be the boss there. He told me. So I thought it over, and I went to Diem. I said, “What gives here?” He begged and plead with me again, so my second mistake was that I said, “All right, I'll go along with it if Eisenhower does.” He did, so he had two years, and I should have only had him less than that.

But that was fun. I don't mind fights, but it was hard to have to fight all the time to get things done. Because just after that, by golly, he canceled these special forces training camps for the .... And I learned about it in this roundabout way. Fortunately for me, I had been at the National War College for two years and the Deputy Commandant for the Army was a guy named [Lyman] Lemnitzer, whom I knew quite well as a personal friend

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as well as a colleague from the War College. So when they canceled this special warfare business, I not only reported it officially but I wrote a personal letter to Lem and I said, "Do something about this." So Williams didn't last very much longer after that, and McGarr came over. I guess because of that reason, I don't know exactly why, but the army did pick a man who was specializing in unconventional warfare at Leavenworth. He was a commandant at Leavenworth before he came over. When he went there some three years or so before, he had almost immediately instituted a compulsory course in Command and General Staff School on counter insurrection and unconventional warfare. So he was all set for it. By the time McGarr got there, everything was still on the track. These camps were going and they were training them in unconventional methods, but McGarr stepped it up quite a bit.

*Q: This question just occurs to me, and I'm not even sure it's a valid question. I have heard that General Williams was hand-picked by General Taylor for the job in Saigon.*

DURBROW: Could have been.

*Q: And I know that General Taylor was very interested in counterinsurgency, you know, the flexible response and so on.*

DURBROW: I know Max Taylor very well. I see him all the time now.

*Q: And it just strikes me, well, why did he pick him if he was going to take this approach? Or is that a valid [question]?*

DURBROW: I never knew that he did. He probably did. I think your information may be perfectly correct, but I don't know. But Williams just didn't understand it. He understood tank maneuvers and trench warfare of World War I, that sort of thing, but he just didn't want to have anything to do with it.

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*Q: How did Diem react? What policies did he institute as the security situation in the countryside began to go downhill in the beginning of 1957 or whenever?*

DURBROW: Well, it really started going down in late 1958 and 1959. As I said, the early period, 1954 to 1956, was the “get myself in the driver's seat,” and he did. He beat the Binh Xuyen and the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai and the rest of them. The three thousand-odd Viet Minh—not Viet Cong, they hadn't even been named yet—guerrillas weren't doing the job they were supposed to, to intimidate the whole countryside. [Then] they'll all rise to the communist cause and then Diem would be thrown out or bumped off.

So then from 1956 to 1959, building up the forces, we finally got Williams—and Diem was not 100 per cent sold on concentrating on unconventional warfare. He still liked tanks and that sort of thing. Williams, of course, helped to convince him of that. So there was a period of peace and quiet basically. There were incidents all the time, like in the new village of cutting off somebody's head or hand or the village chief or a teacher or a province chief or something like that. But, as I say, I traveled all over the darn country without any guard. I had a Vietnamese hunter, and he got a bunch of usually Montagnards to do the packing work for us as we trekked into the jungle. I just told him—of course he told me not to go to certain places like Zone D and Zone C on the Cambodian border, but outside of that I was up and down the spine and on the coast and all over the place and in the jungle.

*Q: What kind of provisions did Diem make for local security, outside of the army? Didn't he have what they call local defense forces or self-defense forces?*

DURBROW: Yes, he had the civil guard.

*Q: The civil guard, right.*

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DURBROW: And they had their own police and the regular army. Incidentally, Williams wouldn't have anything to do with the civil guard, because he didn't control it, the military didn't control it.

*Q: Who controlled it? Were they a police force?*

DURBROW: The civil guard was a rural police force, if you will. They were not like most civil guards. It was a separate force that Diem would have that knew the countryside, weren't going to jump on tanks and come down the roads and that sort of thing. He did all he could to have the countryside policed, to fight off the bands coming out of Zone D and things like that, if he could ever catch them. Sometimes they did.

One of the big battles I had with the Eisenhower Administration was trying to get more helicopters. When I got there, they had six, seven or eight, I've forgotten. We wanted to get some H-34s, I think they were.

*Q: The banana-shaped?*

DURBROW: Oh no, no. The little-bitty ones.

*Q: Oh, okay.*

DURBROW: I've forgotten the designation, but nevertheless, you could get twelve Americans to sixteen Vietnamese—because they're smaller—[on them] with their gear and that sort of thing for dropping in through operations against the guerrillas and evacuating the wounded. For some reason—this was toward the end of the Eisenhower Administration—they resisted. Where they said we didn't have enough, we had other demands, we wanted lots of things. Even Williams went along with that one. And McGarr went along in a big way. So we got them before we left there.



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But Diem wanted to have that sort of thing to help protect the countryside. The diplomatic corps was invited—not all of them, but selectively, ten or twelve chiefs of mission—to go with Diem out in the jungle out on the Delta for two-day trips. They had security guards all along the line and lots of other things and then boats were down in the Delta area, in the rain forest. They did a pretty good job in protecting us that way. By the time McGarr got there, things were going pretty hot and heavy internally. 1960, at Bien Hoa Air Base there, you know, two of our guys got killed.

*Q: Excuse me, I had the impression that was 1959. I may be wrong.*

DURBROW: Maybe it was.

*Q: It's not terribly important.*

DURBROW: It was 1959, yes. That's the first real big effort they made—the Viet Cong—to get a very important base right near the center of the capital, fifteen miles away. And of course, it was a hit-and-run job, again. When they got two of our officers, you know, it was very sad. But then they started hitting other ARVN bases not to kill men, necessarily, to capture—they wanted to get medical supplies and guns and ammunition. The Ho Chi Minh Trail had not been reopened again. So there was Tay Ninh in January of 1960 or February of 1960. And then in October-November 1960, they hit a bunch of construction sites up the new roads Diem was trying to build up in the spine of the Annamites.

*Q: Was that the road to Ban Me Thuot?*

DURBROW: No, beyond Ban Me Thuot. North of Pleiku.

*Q: Kontum, perhaps.*

DURBROW: Beyond Kontum. There was no road there. You got up to Kontum and a few miles further and the route was just rocky mountains. So he was trying for military

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reasons and other reasons to put in a road to Nha Trang. They hit some construction camps there in a pretty good-sized operation. That was a day after they started up there, and I saw where they had artillery and shooting in various places. It was a well-organized affair. By that time, it was clear that they had given up hope that the guerrilla, terrorist, propaganda, subversive operation was going to topple Diem. So they decided they'd better do something more organized. Those are the first signs of it we had.

Then in December 1960, we got a report that some IL-14 Soviet transports were staging through Hanoi—our Canadian friends told us this, from the ICC, International Control Commission—flying off to the west. So we got that on early—about the second or third of December. So I asked my air attaché, who was assigned to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, all three, so he could fly around all around the place. Just file a flight plan, he could take off, didn't have to get special visas or anything else like that. So I said, "Why don't you fly up to Vientiane tomorrow and see what you can see up there, what's happening."

So he got in his C-47 and flew up there, had some cameras with him. And sure enough, he flew a little bit out of his route over the Plaine des Jarres, which is a very flat plain in Laos there, the entrance to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and sure enough, got pictures of IL-14s flying in there. They were parachuting it in this day—this is about the second or third of December, I've forgotten what it was, early December. And there were pretty heavy things they were putting in there. Finally, he flew around a bit, saw what looked like a small tractor going in there, a bulldozer.

So we reported that, and on the day before Christmas, the twenty-fourth of December, he flew up again to get some more pictures with a better guy to take the pictures. We had no special plane for taking pictures. And this time these IL-14s had teeth in them. They let go at him, and thank God it didn't shoot it down, but several bullets hit the fuselage and one sergeant got a—

*Q: Now, let me be straight. This was air-to-air combat?*

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DURBROW: Yes, yes, yes. Aerial combat. The IL-14 had seen our guy flying around. They said we better get some machine guns on board these things. So from these IL-14s coming in—they were landing by that time, they'd made an airstrip. They were landing. So in taking their pictures they got shot at, just a few holes in the tail of the plane, that was all, and they got to Vientiane. Then we reported that and we got permission through Bangkok to release the pictures taken by somebody—I don't know who it was—to show what was happening.

So they started opening up the Ho Chi Minh Trail at that time. This was full Soviet assistance, these IL-14s flying in. From then on in, they pushed down the Trail more and more, and the operations in Laos got more organized and larger scale, infiltration got much more concentrated down toward Vietnam. Then they started hitting these camps and that sort of thing.

*Q: Had there been infiltration before this time?*

DURBROW: Oh yes, sure. There'd been infiltration, quite a bit of it. But they couldn't do it in large droves and the very heavy equipment, trucks couldn't come through. The DMZ was pretty well protected. You could infiltrate men across the DMZ. It was very rugged, it had paths and that sort of thing. There was a jungle to help.

*Q: How about by sea? Did you have much evidence of infiltration that way?*

DURBROW: No, there was some, but very little. That was too hard. That was pretty well patrolled. Pretty hard to do. There was some. But the estimate of it then by 1959 was that the original two to three thousand had been stepped up to maybe six to eight thousand, we never knew exactly, because the operation was more sophisticated, they were better trained. See, the ones they left behind in 1954 to 1956 and so forth were all southerners. They spoke with a southern accent. While they speak the same language, it's like our Deep South in this country and our Down Eastern Mainers. They're distinguishable, quite

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distinguishable. So then when they started training the new cadre to infiltrate, they took boys that were up in the North, born in the South, that accent, because they'd run out of southerners to come down to fill out the cadre in the South. But the build-up started really in 1959.

*Q: Let me propound a thesis to you that I have seen proposed to explain Hanoi's actions in this period in the late fifties. It's been asserted that Hanoi expected to win by means more or less political in the late fifties and that was why they didn't push the shooting war any harder before 1959. And that Diem's anti-communist programs in the South—I think he called it the Communist Denunciation Program—was putting so much heat on the stay-behinds that the southern communists essentially told Hanoi, “If you don't start something, we're going to have to or we're going to be down the drain.”*

DURBROW: “We're not going to win.” They weren't going to win. But how could they do it politically? They thought in 1954 that by intimidation, terrorism, propaganda and persuasion they could show this weak puppet called Diem, this American stooge and that sort of thing, “It's not going to do you any good. We've got a feel for the workers. We're all for the workers. Workers of the world unite,” slogan things. But it just didn't work, even in the 1954-56 period. By 1956, 1958, 1959, they still tried it by raids on villages, and cutting off hands and heads, and terrorism, and it just didn't work. So deciding it could be done politically is—the people didn't rally to them by their intimidation or promises or propaganda or persuasion or subversion, so they had to change. Your version you just gave me is the same thing except that nothing can be done politically. It was not going to be done by this small group down there that would cause Diem to lose all backing among the people and they'd join the other team. Well, they didn't and they didn't all run either. Despite the fact when the thing got really going in the sixties, there were the police and the civil guard and the militia and the regular army, ARVN. There were some four hundred thousand guys who had guns in there. They could have shot it all at Diem and knocked him all up, but they stayed loyal to Diem and [Nguyen Van] Thieu and [Nguyen Cao] Ky and the rest of them. And the version you heard there, I'm afraid, was part of this

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revisionist historian type of stuff that's been put out by our press and others that we forced the people, the communists, to react. Please, just don't ever believe that junk.

*Q: Well, I wanted to stimulate a reaction.*

DURBROW: I lived too damn long behind the Curtain myself and we're dealing with that same problem today, "If we do that, that'll stimulate them to react." Of course they're going to react. Well, who the hell started it? When they left these three thousand guys behind, they hoped to do it, and it didn't work. Then they started infiltrating more down there. It didn't work, so they decided they'd better pour the regular stuff on, and they did by guerrilla type operations. By 1961-62 the Ho Chi Minh Trail was pretty well open then. They'd been working on it since before that [with the] bulldozer dropped to the Plaine des Jarres. They opened it up and they were getting quite sizeable convoys coming down. We weren't allowed to hit them. Diem wasn't allowed to hit them in Laos or Cambodia.

That brings up another thing. They were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in piles but not by large convoys, and they set up these sanctuaries in Cambodia just across the Vietnamese line, just east of Phnom Penh and west of Saigon. They had all these Viet Minh troops in there and I went over to Phnom Penh every once in a while to see my colleague Bill Trimble who was a very close friend of mine from way back days. It was only forty-five minutes by plane. So I'd go over to see Bill and sometimes I'd see [Norodom] Sihanouk, and Bill would come see me and [I'd say], "Do you want to see Diem this time?" We'd work out these things—and they weren't getting along, never did—hoping to get them to drop the hatchet a bit and then collaborate. We knew these Viet Minh troops were in Cambodia in 1960, and in January 1960 I was over seeing Bill and—when was it?—it must have been 1960. Well, I can get that for you later.

But anyway, Diem is squawking like the devil about this big bunch of Viet Minh troops having a sanctuary and operating out of a sanctuary area, parading into the Delta, getting rice, discombobulating the population in large units, company units and that sort of thing,

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pretty good size for that sort of operation. And why does Sihanouk let them stay there? So this particular day, Diem invited Bill and me to come talk to him. I'd gone to school in France and got my master's degree at the Sorbonne so I could speak French pretty well and Bill had better command of French than I have. So we both could speak to Sihanouk just alone, no interpreters around, free to let our hair down and talk Dutch uncle business. So in this conversation that came up, I said to Bill, "I'm going to try to work in to see if I can ask the question: why the hell doesn't he do something about getting rid of those Viet Minh troops in his territory, violating his neutrality and all that sort of thing?" So I've forgotten how it came up in the conversation, but I wheeled in and Bill helped me along a bit. Sihanouk—did you ever hear his voice?

Q: Yes.

DURBROW: A very high-pitched voice. "Je ne sais pas pourquoi vous posez cette question comme ca mais tout [inaudible]." So I said, "Well, you know, you don't get along with Ngo Dinh Diem and your people haven't got along over the centuries, but you're both in the same boat now. Hanoi wants to take you both over, Moscow does, and so does China. Why the dickens don't you try to bury the hatchet a bit? One thing, if you could possibly do it, is to try to drive those Viet Minh out of your territory right across the Parrot's Beak there and beyond the Mekong." He hit the high C's on this one. He said, "I know they're there. I know they're there." I said, "Well, there's quite a lot of them." "Yes, there's about twenty-five thousand of them. I don't have an army of twenty-five, thirty thousand with all my militia. There's the Mekong River in between, there's only one road, it's marshy all around the side. I don't want them there. They shouldn't be there. I can't get rid of them. Don't blame me." He was telling us all this, it was what we wanted to hear.

So he got all through and I said, "Could I pass that on to Diem that maybe you'll collaborate a little bit? You push them one way and you'll need your whole army and you push there and you'll cut off their line of supplies to the north somewhere and—" "No, no, no, we can't do that. I haven't got enough army." So he said, when I'd bring up this,

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talking, "Don't you tell that to Diem." I said, "I'm not going to tell him. I won't. Of course I won't." "And what's more, if either one of you tell your government about this and it gets published, I'm going to deny every word you said and call you both liars." (Laughter)

*Q: I heard or saw him described a few years ago as a cross between an absolute dictator and Hubert Humphrey. Is that apt?*

DURBROW: That's very apt. (Laughter) He was in town the other day, about within the last year. He'd come to visit and I went up to see him to see what he looked like.

*Q: Did you get to talk to him?*

DURBROW: Oh, I talked—it was just a reception, about fifty other people there. But he recognized me of course, and we chatted for just a minute. He was trying to get us to do some setting up of his new government in Cambodia.

But anyway, things were going very bad by 1959. McGarr, as soon as he got there, went in for the unconventional warfare step-up.

*Q: Can I interrupt a second? It seems to me that I have seen that in 1960 Washington directed that some kind of counterinsurgency plan—*

DURBROW: That's what I'm going to talk about.

*Q: Is that what you're talking about?*

DURBROW: I'm going to bring that up.

*Q: Good.*

DURBROW: Under McGarr who was all for it. So we got the MAAG, the AID program, and the CIA to work together as a real team. We got a team going and no quibbling and squabbling about who's on first or second. So we had what we called the

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counterinsurgency plan and it took us about three months. And the military put all their input on why and how it'd be used, and where it'd be used, and what kind of rifles and machine guns and helicopters, everything. And we put ours in the CIA and all the different plans. That thing was worked on and worked on and worked on until finally sent out by courier just before Christmas. I'd say the twenty-second of December in 1960. We learned later by telegram that it had arrived in the department just before New Year's, had been glanced over and they said, "Keep up the good work. We'll give you some reaction."

Of course, in the meantime, Kennedy was just about ready to take over, and so we were given a few go-aheads on some of the things we had been looking for for a long time. "Go ahead with the old program. We can't tell you later." Then we were very gratified and they sent a photostatic copy, a Xerox copy of the—we had a summary of the thing in the first part, by itself I would think, and Kennedy looked it over apparently enough to [write], "Why so little? JFK." We were scared. It was about two hundred million dollars. We were making a hell of a—we were going for a big show. And "Why so little?" Then on the basis of that, Johnson came over there in May. I presume that is [why], anyway. I don't know why, but that made us rather gratified.

So the picture changed like the mischief beginning in 1959 when they opened up the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We knew it was going on, the raids in Tay Ninh, the one in Bien Hoa before that, way up north of Pleiku and all that sort of thing. So the fat was in the fire and anybody that tries to kid the American public that this is only because we were being mean to them and weren't even letting them take over politically in the South, is the same kind of stuff they're talking about in Angola, Namibia and whatnot. If they don't get their way, we provoked them into doing something worse.

*Q: Let me ask you a few questions about intelligence, because that's an issue that comes up from time to time, too. How good was our intelligence when you arrived in country?*



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DURBROW: It was fairly good. The CIA was doing a good job. A fellow named Nick Natsios was the chief of station when I first got there. We became very good friends. Bill Colby was the fellow who succeeded him. I'd been with Bill in Rome, all right, so we knew each other quite well, were very good friends. By the time I got there—of course, [Edward] Lansdale did a very good job, despite the reputation he's had. You know, he [Johnson] recommended I not stay there in 1961; he knew I was going out already, so he said I should be replaced.

*Q: Oh, that was when he made the visit in 1961. Okay.*

DURBROW: Yes. I developed my throat among other things, and my nose was running and I was six years in the tropics. Knowing there was a change of party and also a change of regime at home here, I'd written my good friend Loy Henderson, who was once a Moscow stable mate of mine. I said, "I'm not rushing to get out of here, but I've got this sinus drip and this sort of thing." It irritated my upper lip so much I had to raise a mustache. I had great big scabs all around here. I'd been there so doggone long in Saigon that I became chief, you know, the dean of the diplomatic corps. Go around kissing babies and cutting ribbons, so I had to raise a mustache. That was fine. I got this French tropical doctor, military doctor, [who had] been out there for years, a very nice guy named Kessier [phonetic], a very nice fellow. And he said, "I can cure it up." So he said, "It's an old cure, an old cure. They don't use it anymore, but it's going to work." An old German dye, gentian violet—have you ever seen any gentian violet? So he said, "You put this on in the evening and you sleep with it. Then you take it off in the morning with this." And it burned. And my gosh, did it hurt. But my mustache was purple. (Laughter)

So here I am running around kissing babies and doing all the things that the dean of the diplomatic corps [is supposed to do]. So I had asked Loy to move me out of here, and I made a recommendation that because of the so-called elections, which weren't our type of elections, but they're better than none, that Diem was going to have in May of 1961—there was a lot of controversy whether he's going to have re-elections and all that

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sort of business, who's going to be in the opposition and all this do-good stuff at home, which doesn't do anybody any good, us particularly. The country doesn't understand what democracy's all about. But I said, "Maybe it'd be a good thing if my successor"—before I knew who it was going to be actually—"could come in with a clean slate. The elections are won or lost, whatever happens to them. [Otherwise] he comes in and gets tarred with a brush that he didn't put enough in their democracy, and I'm an S.O.B., already." So that's why I stayed until May 2, incidentally.

Things were going much worse by then, but the counterinsurgency plan had started to work. [Here's] another bit of information that may not be in the records. There's a colleague of ours—and I've forgotten who it was in the embassy in Paris, a fellow I knew, anyway—[who] got to talking with a Frenchman I guess early in 1960. Something came out about how the French had fooled us about the number of advisers they had when they left Vietnam in 1954. The official record was, at the Geneva Conferences, Geneva Accords, six hundred and forty-two. I've forgotten the figure. You can get those or I can check my records. Freddie Reinhardt worked—you had a bunch of recovery teams come in there, so we never got above nine hundred and forty-two advisers. The recovery team was a cover to get some more guys in there; we needed them. We did recover a lot of the equipment that was left there; they shipped it out. We didn't need three hundred more guys, but we did get them.

He said, "You know, we had about nineteen hundred advisers there in 1954 and we told you six hundred and forty-two and you guys bought it." So he reported this to me personally and said, "I don't know if it'll do you any good, Durby, but this guy, I drew him out quite a bit and he gave me some champagne or something and more details: 'We had about nineteen hundred and some-odd—'" So we said, "Sure it will." So we asked the department to run this thing down, to double-check it and get somebody in the French government to officially confirm that yes, they had lost some records or something and they didn't realize how many they did have, but it was nineteen hundred and sixty-six. So by that time, we had the official record and the French said, yes, they did have that many

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military advisers in Vietnam and they should have given us that figure when they made the accords in 1954.

So here we are, Christmas time, presents all over the place, so it was on the basis of that that JFK and the rest of the boys bring up their [proposal]. It was already in the mill when Kennedy actually took over. But that's how we got the bunch of advisers. It wasn't something that happened, that Kennedy did overnight. We knew that we needed many more to carry out this counterinsurgency plan. We made this lucky discovery, confirmed by the French. So we told the ICC—the International Control Commission—the Canadians, the Indians and the Poles. They checked the records. Yes, the French confirmed that they made a mistake in 1954, so under the accords, we were allowed to have the same number the French had. So that made it possible.

*Q: The ICC bought it?*

DURBROW: The ICC bought it, yes. Not the Poles, but the others did.

*Q: Well, the Poles never—*

DURBROW: The Poles never did. Incidentally, one of the guys—well, several of them; I was there four years and a half—one of the Poles I knew very well when I was in Poland, way back when he was a young man, of course.

*Q: Well, you get on these career tracks and you just keep crossing trails.*

DURBROW: The elite. (Laughter)

*Q: Now, I have seen some place a CIA National Intelligence Estimate, an NIE, I guess they're called.*

DURBROW: NIE, yes.

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*Q: —that was done in 1959. Now, I don't know what month; I can't recall off-hand. I have the impression that Chester Cooper had a hand in writing it—maybe he was the chief author, I'm not sure—which said that one of the things that was making things worse was that Diem's repressions were alienating too many people. Now, was that intelligence coming from Washington to you, or were they feeding off what you were telling Washington?*

DURBROW: We were getting it. Have you read my request for instructions in September, 1960?

*Q: I can't remember seeing it.*

DURBROW: Well, by the time I'd been there several years, a year or two, I got to know Diem very well and I admired him and respected him. He wasn't a Jeffersonian Democrat, and he couldn't be. He didn't understand it, among other [things]. His country couldn't run that way. To try to demand that they must all have free, open-seated elections overnight is just impossible in any country, wherever it is, unless they have some mores and build-up for the thing, some feel for it and understanding. So it got so that I could talk to him really very frankly. I had many very frank talks with him. I'd see him once a week, sometimes more often and sometimes three times a month, whatever it was. But you had to set a half a day aside when you went over there. He talked and talked and talked and talked and talked.

He didn't delegate any authority—one of his problems—except with his brother a little bit, some of his generals, but just a little bit. He was trying to do too darn much and things weren't getting done on the AID program, the military program, the social programs or wherever, public relations, among others. So I'd had many frank talks with him and had had instructions, which I usually asked for, to get pretty frank with him. And he could have thrown me out as persona non grata, but we got on a very good man-to-man basis, not agreeing on everything but with mutual respect, I guess you want to call it.

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So I asked for these instructions. We got together the country team and said, "He is not getting over public relations-wise, not only with our country. People back at home [think] they're not democratic enough, [he] doesn't have enough free elections and this, that, and the other thing, and no free press and all the rest of the thing." But do you know what the Can Lao Party is?

Q: Yes.

DURBROW: That's the Diem party, the Nhu party—Nhu was the head of it—and CIA penetrated it. I don't know how the hell they penetrated it, but they did. We knew a great deal about what was going on—really a lot—and the grumbling and how things are going better, the economy is going better. They passed the pre-war rice production in 1958, rubber in 1957, exports were going up and things were going much better. The land reform program was all over in the Delta; the new villages up in the mountains weren't going too well for the reasons I explained, but that was all fine. The Can Lao Party was antagonizing too many people and arresting too many people. We knew it; we didn't know how many exactly of course. So he was our man, he was on our side, he was an anti-communist, he was not anti-American by any means. He was a dedicated patriot, he was not corrupt anymore than any other Asian, clearly less than most of them, some of them in the Philippines, their own little country. I was all for him. The department was, too, I think, and our government in general.

So we worked up these instructions, a rather long request for instructions, and it bandied back and forth with changes here and there. And finally I got my go-ahead, and I had about three or four—very long ones this time—maybe four-hour talks with Diem as a straight Dutch uncle about setting up a joint chief of staff to have some say-so. "Don't try to run everything, delegate authority here, do this, do that, the Can Lao Party be—" I told him two or three times about some of the things we knew the Can Lao Party was doing, monopolizing the cinnamon trade and all that sort of thing, and getting money from the South to enforce declarations going through our custom. We had quite a bit of dope on

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this whole [thing]. For a little country of that size, the CIA and the AID people were doing a good job, too. One way or another we got pretty good intelligence.

So anyway, I got these instructions and had this long talk and he didn't agree with any of it basically, but he didn't throw me out or didn't try to change the subject. He promised to think them over. He started to implement some of them, quite a few, and that's what I'm after. I sent—what you get in the Pentagon Papers is a New York Times version—my request for instructions to tell him this, and telling him the other thing. Then at the end of the thing, if the department approves of me talking along these lines, in the event that by chance he doesn't go along, doesn't want to go along with most of them and doesn't try to do what he can to help himself with our suggestions and assistance, it is perhaps time for us to give serious consideration to look around and see if we may not have to look for another leader over here.

*Q: Now, Mr. Ambassador, let me interrupt you a second. You have mentioned a number of specific things that you talked to Diem about on this occasion, delegating authority through a joint chiefs of staff sort of set-up and so on.*

DURBROW: And the civilian side, too, yes. Premier. The vice president. Let the vice president do some things.

*Q: Now, these all strike me as being administrative sorts of improvements, loosening the reins of authority a little bit and so on.*

DURBROW: Yes. Free press.

*Q: How does this approach the subject of the repressions that were supposed to be—?*

DURBROW: Well, the Can Lao Party operation was brought up in quite a big way.

*Q: You mentioned they were arresting people.*

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DURBROW: And they were.

*Q: What sorts of [people]?*

DURBROW: He didn't have just thousands and thousands of political prisoners. He had hundreds and they were pretty key people in the opposition, so they got squawks from their other people. But it was authoritarian government. It wasn't a dictatorship, he wasn't Stalin. I had the dubious pleasure of spending all my six years in Moscow under Stalin. I knew what a real so-and-so can be and how he operates, with real secret police and no opposition whatsoever. There was opposition in Vietnam and you could talk to other people. They'd come and talk to you and it wasn't this omnipotent KGB-type operation. So it was authoritarian. It has to be. They'd never had any government of their own for some two or three centuries, and the French and others.

*Q: Wasn't it in 1959—I'm a little shaky on this, I think it was 1959—wasn't there sort of an ad hoc group of notables who got together and wrote an open letter to Diem recommending improvements?*

DURBROW: Yes, yes.

*Q: They got in trouble for doing that.*

DURBROW: Yes, they did. We helped them to write it a bit, the CIA—

*Q: Oh, you did?*

DURBROW: Yes, we did. They didn't get in real trouble. Oh, they lost their influence, so to speak. But the guy was right, the country was going very well economically, going along with a lot of those things, but he just couldn't help being the good old mandarin that his ancestors had been. His father had been a mandarin type in Hue and that sort of thing. So he had to make some moves in a relaxing direction, and we didn't demand that he

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have free elections better than New York City or anything like that. But [we recommended] having more free elections and more freedom of the press, give press conferences and things to allow the people to have some safety valves, talk to the senators and the representatives to allow them to have safety valves and other grievances.

Anyway, Halberstam in his book gives me a great deal of credit—I was the guy that tried to get rid of Diem way long back. We should have gotten rid of him way before that, but Durbrow did have the good idea of getting rid of him in September 1960. I had no such idea whatsoever, because I had this shirt tail on the thing and in case it doesn't work, boys, just don't think we got to back this guy up forever when we ever start to thinking about who the hell could we get to replace him somehow. And we were paying for all these darn things and we were trying to hold it in our days of containment, which is the only way to run the railroad against the Soviets as far as I'm concerned. So if we can't get this guy to help us on this thing, we got to look for somebody else.

Just an afterthought sort of thing. So I was the guy that really wanted to get rid of Diem in 1960, and why did we not do it until 1963, says Halberstam.

*Q: If you had to give Halberstam a grade for the things he says about your tenure in Saigon, what would it be? F?*

DURBROW: He gave me the wrong grade. He gave me an A. I should have had an F from his point of view.

*Q: But I want you to grade Halberstam now.*

DURBROW: Well, I've never met Halberstam. I haven't tried to duck him, I haven't had an opportunity to meet him. He got there after I left there. I was so concerned about his stuff for the New York Times, as I read it in Paris—I was transferred to the NATO Council in Paris—that I went to Drew Middleton, who was the chief of bureau there. And I'd known Drew very, very well in Moscow at the end of the war and then in 1946 to 1948. And I had



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lunch with Drew several times. I never did meet this guy Halberstam. You know I just got out of Vietnam and what he was saying there was just completely crazy, "These Buddhists are being persecuted by Diem." By the way, Diem was not an anti-Buddhist. He was a Catholic of course, a very devout Catholic, but he was very tolerant of religion. Halberstam saying this, that, and the other thing, I said, "Why the devil did the Times send a guy like that, because the only thing I can tell you there is that they're completely wrong." "I don't know, Durby."

Finally he saw these things coming and whatnot, these dispatches. Halberstam did his two years, he was transferred from Saigon to Paris and I think it may be my poison, but anyway, Drew said, "I won't take him." By that time Drew is pretty high up in the Times' foreign correspondents business. He'd been in since the early part of World War II. So Drew didn't take him in his bureau in Paris, and he went to Poland and was the bureau chief there in Poland—where he met his wife, incidentally.

But to get back to Halberstam, I've not checked this through myself personally because it doesn't make any difference, but a young kid, a young graduate student came to see me four or five years ago from American University here to talk about this period in Vietnam and war. And he said, "You got the best marks of any ambassador from Halberstam there." "Yes, I noticed that." I told him why he was wrong, it was just exactly the opposite. Now, if he was trying to tell the whole truth, why the hell didn't he put in—because they are available in the Pentagon Papers, too—my reply of my four-hour discussion with Diem where he'd agreed to do things and was doing things then and whatnot? If I was such a good guy, why didn't he give the full story?

But he said, "Don't you know where Halberstam got all that thing for The Best and the Brightest in his book?" I said, "I know when he was sitting out there. No." "He was allowed to see the Pentagon Papers before they were leaked." Those direct quotes, I said I couldn't understand why Halberstam could quote so-and-so, Marshall or I don't know who all, Rusk or McNamara or all over the place, those guys, direct quotes doing this, that

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and the other thing. It sounded like they're official and real. He saw the Pentagon Papers. He worked on the Pentagon Papers, made a lot of money, supposed to split with Daniel Ellsberg, too, I don't know.

*Q: Well, of course Neil Sheehan was a good friend of Halberstam.*

DURBROW: Oh, yes, sure. Yes.

I want to finish on this Diem thing. He started in really doing quite a lot of them, really going very, very well for about six weeks until November 11 and the coup. You can bring up the coup then, the [Nguyen Chanh] Thi coup, which is a serious thing, but we had rumors of coups every other week there. The CIA had the place pretty well cased. I must say they did a very fine job there. They didn't know this particular one on this particular day, you are never sure.

But they had it all set up and it started about three o'clock in the morning. My residence was half a mile from the palace. The chancery's half a mile the other way about as the bird flies. We had an air-conditioned room, so the windows were closed and I heard, "Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!" I went out on the balcony and I could see flashes down there, fireworks. What's this? Before I got to the telephone to the duty officer down at the embassy—because that was higher up, that was a seven or eight-story building—to see what he could see and whatnot, who was on the phone but Bill Colby, the station chief of Saigon whose house was literally on Independence Avenue, which is the main drag leading up to the palace, two blocks north of the palace. The guys were all becoming reporters right in front of his house. And Bill was reporting, getting his own boys around, and by about five o'clock that morning one of them came through the fire and got into my house, gave me a full report, who it was, Colonel Thi, what he was doing, how the others were handling it. It really went on for a couple of days. But my beautiful thoughts and my beautiful efforts and the State Department's and everything else to get Diem to go on the right track were thrown off the track immediately.

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*Q: Now, why was that?*

DURBROW: Somebody really revolted against him. And all these things we said, these democratic things, these freedom things, these relaxing of tensions, “Well, look what I got to face, by God! The air force at least went after me. I'd better do something about it and I've got to go back to my old ways of operating.”

*Q: Lansdale reported — I may be paraphrasing him slightly—when he came back in 1961 that Diem had developed a deep distrust of the State Department. I think that's a direct quote.*

DURBROW: He probably did say something like that.

*Q: Can you account for it?*

DURBROW: Maybe I'm one of the reasons. We tried like the dickens to get him to do these things. We thought it would be in the long-range interest of Vietnam and ourselves as well, but basically his. It wouldn't hurt us too much if he got bumped off. It caused a lot of trouble and got us in a war, but we weren't thinking in those terms then. But Fritz [Frederick] Nolting got along with him very well, you know, and with Nhu as well, even better than I did, I understand from what Fritz tells me and others did. Maybe because of that September tete-a-tete I had with him. I had a couple of others with him, too, before I left in May.

Incidentally, Halberstam said that after I tried to get rid of one of those instructions that [Diem] didn't give the answer to, that I hardly ever saw Diem from then on in until I left; he didn't even give me a farewell party. He gave me three.

*Q: Three?*

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DURBROW: Oh, yes. One was a very intimate one for my wife and myself, the Nhu, General Thieu, the chief of staff, and his wife, and about eight or ten. Nobody else on our side, just all these Vietnamese. We had a wonderful evening. Then I got the big one, then the one from the foreign office. I saw him just as often after September as I ever did, but Halberstam [wrote that] the guy that really tried to get rid of that son of a bitch wasn't spoken to for the rest of the six to eight months, he had no contact with Diem. Well, we had all kinds of contact with Diem. That's what I think of Halberstam.

*Q: Can you account for that in Halberstam's book at all?*

DURBROW: I don't know why our press then and still now, in many cases, are bending over backwards to make us look like boobs, around the world, be it El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, name it. When I was there, there was very little press, you see. They had a couple of stringers and the boys that come down from Hong Kong or from Tokyo to spend a week, two weeks looking things over, and a lot of them I knew before. But as soon as we got troops in—I guess by the time the Vice President came over, Johnson came over, and you had all these new advisers coming in and the counterinsurgency plan was coming in over the docks, you couldn't miss seeing it—the boys started flocking down. So why they turned out that way and just almost 100 per cent undermined everything that was going on [I don't know]. Wrong, wrong, wrong, terrible, terrible, terrible.

*Q: I have seen an interview that General Williams gave to U.S. News and World Report about 1964. He said that when he left South Vietnam—and I think he left in September of 1960—and this is a quote, "the situation bordered on the critical," unquote, and what he meant was in the context that relations between Diem and USOM were so bad that the situation was critical. Would you comment on that?*

DURBROW: I remember that. That was one of our problems with Diem. A lot of our AID stuff was not getting out in the field, out in the country, and fertilizer was not going out to the farmers and the rest of it. So I had a very good, tough USOM guy—Haraldson, by

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name, Wes Haraldson—and we concocted [a plan]. He talked to his counterpart numbers in the government and I'd talk to Diem about that sort of thing. That they had to show better use of the stuff and not have it stacked up in warehouses.

Then we had reports. We never got them quite 100 per cent, but I think they were true, that the Can Lao was using some to feather their own nest maybe or to get their own cohorts to stick faithful to them. Despite the reports in the press, incidentally, about Nhu and Diem having these millions of dollars in Swiss bank accounts which [they were] flying over—you've heard the expression Radio Catinat? Catinat was the French name for Tu Do Street. That's where the hotels are where all the correspondents lived. So I've been in lots of places with lots of rumors, but I've never been in a place anywhere where the rumors popped up [as they did] in Saigon. Unbelievable! [There were rumors that] Radio Catinat had all this money stashed away and everything else like that, they were feathering their own nest, getting ready to fly. Well, I don't know what money they had in what bank account in Switzerland, if any, or whether Mrs. Nhu really had this coffee plantation that she was supposed to have down in Brazil or the Rex movie theater in Paris. We got the CIA to check that any doggone way they could to see whether [they were true]. Those are two reports I particularly remember. And [there was] no verification whatsoever, not even hints about it.

But when they both were bumped off—Nhu and Diem were bumped off in 1963—Mrs. Nhu was out of the country and saved her neck that way. In Paris, when I was later on in Paris, she lived with Brother Nguyen—that was the youngest brother of the Ngo family—in one of these great big French apartments where you've got lots of room. The Nguyens had eleven children. She had two, and herself. Then one of our military guys on the NATO staff lived literally right below her. He saw her go up in the elevator and knew the concierge. They were living like peasants in this room, just stacked in like sardines in a tin in this fairly big apartment in a nice part of Paris. Finally they had to move.

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She moved down to Rome where the oldest brother of the family, the Archbishop, was able to get a little place for her to live out in Frascati, just outside of Rome. I checked that with my CIA friends, and they checked on it. She was living very frugally. She lost the key to all these riches or they didn't know where it was or they didn't tell her. But this idea of corruption was greatly exaggerated, but our press just fell for it hook, line and sinker.

Talking about USOM and Williams, I haven't heard that one before. But anyway, he didn't like the USOM because they were getting much more aid that he thought his boys should get, dividing up the pie in many cases. They had the civil guard under their... They were supplying the supplies.

*Q: Wasn't there some kind of argument over the civil guard?*

DURBROW: Oh, God, yes. A hell of one.

*Q: What was that about?*

DURBROW: "Well, if I can't control it, I'm not going to give a damn if it all goes to pot," was Sam Williams' basic idea. And Diem didn't want to put it under the military and we knew it was a good idea that it should be a rural police sort of thing, as it was really supposed to be and you need different kinds of weapons. You don't need tanks, you don't need personnel carriers or that sort of thing. So USOM funded the military supplies for the civil guard and we tried to get—McGarr went along with it very nicely—Williams to make some suggestion, for God's sake, for something besides the military, the regular army, to help these guys to do their operation in the countryside for internal security.

*Q: Who was in charge of the training of the civil guard? Or were they being given any?*

DURBROW: Oh, gosh, I can't remember. It wasn't MAAG.

*Q: Was MSU [Michigan State University] involved in that?*

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DURBROW: Yes, MSU was, that's right. Of course they were.

*Q: I was curious.*

DURBROW: Oh, yes, yes. MSU, yes. They did a very good job, by the way, I think. Now, I'd just forgotten this—my mind. And they got civilian trainers to come over from police forces and that sort of thing and it was very good. They set up the police force in Saigon, too, as a matter of fact. I'd forgotten about MSU. Had it in my notes but I'd forgotten about that.

*Q: I've heard there was a controversy over the fact that General Williams went out of channels on one occasion over a question of arms for the civil guard. Do you recall any such incident?*

DURBROW: Yes, yes. Gosh, I can't remember the details. You're quite right. He did. Gee, I can't remember. No question, I remember very well it happened, [but] the details—that just slips my mind.

*Q: Well, I don't know the details, but I thought—*

DURBROW: Yes, yes, he did. I told you that one of my many mistakes were those two. Hanging Sam was his name, you know.

*Q: Yes, yes, I've heard that. Apparently that was famous throughout the army, that he was Hanging Sam.*

DURBROW: Yes, because he was the guy, the guard at the Nuremberg trials.

*Q: Were you able to brief your successor, Mr. Nolting?*

DURBROW: Yes. You never brief your successor at the post. That's an old tradition. Why I don't know. It's obvious why, I guess. You're the has-been and don't gummy up the works,

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and he comes in as a fresh mind or fresh ambassador, fresh look, new administration, whatever it is. Fritz and I were old friends anyway, so we debriefed each other at Honolulu. I left on the second of May and he got in about the seventh or eighth, got there just in time for LBJ to arrive. We had a day and a half at CINCPAC in Honolulu.

*Q: What did you tell him?*

DURBROW: Oh, I told him more or less what I'm telling you now. We were very old friends. [We discussed] the problem I was having with Diem and why I thought they rose up again, the coup, and that sort of thing.

I saw a lot of Nhu, incidentally; I haven't mentioned this before. I didn't see him as often as I did Diem. I made a point of seeing Nhu, but the CIA boys worked more closely with Nhu, and I'd see him maybe once a month. Very little socially, because he didn't ever go out at all, but I'd try to make a point of seeing him, the foreign minister. But Diem really ran the show.

*Q: Can you tell me what kind of picture you painted for Mr. Nolting, just in broad terms? Did you tell him the situation?*

DURBROW: Well, I know definitely, as I've said already, I liked Diem very much. He was our man. He was not the kind of guy we'd have picked if we were picking the perfect guy for the job we had over there, but he was on our side and all the rest of the things that I've said. And I told him about taking half a day off if you're going to go over there. You're going to spend time, he'll talk with you. I told him how to break in if you can. If you can get him to break in, he'll listen to you. And Fritz spoke quite good French, too, so try to not have any interpreter, he didn't like it. He doesn't want his own staff to know what he's told you.

Incidentally, on that score he very politely and very delicately, after he learned that I knew French quite well and I translate back and forth, asked me when some bigwigs came over there, Lemnitzer or whoever it was, would I mind being the interpreter. He didn't want his



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own staff to know what he said to these guys. So I said, "Please, go ahead, s'il vous plait." So I talked to Fritz along those lines.

*Q: Now, you say you went to Paris, is that correct, after this?*

DURBROW: Yes.

*Q: Were you able to follow from that vantage point what was happening in Vietnam?*

DURBROW: Yes. I'd been there four years plus I liked the place, I'd tramped around the place, I'd been around, I hoped I'd done them some good, and then when I saw these really Halberstam-type, Sheehan-type stories and all the rest, they just made me burn. So I went to Drew Middleton and said, "This guy's telling a bunch of hoopla." Of course, I was still getting the traffic, the State Department traffic, and you get traffic from the Southeast Asian part of it, too, so I didn't bother to read it all. Anyway, I didn't have time. But in one sense the word that while NATO—that's out of the NATO territory, dealing with the French and other powers, and what of our picture in Vietnam and what we were doing out there and when our troops came in. So I was Mr. Vietnam on the American delegation to NATO and discussed it with the council once in a while, something that happened and what did you hear about it. So I tried to keep in fairly close touch with it, not just from the press.

*Q: What was your reaction when the news of the Diem coup, the one in 1963, came over?*

DURBROW: I was just stunned. I was. I couldn't tell you, guarantee what happened. I knew it was going to be one hell of a mess. There's nobody can take over, because [when] I made that suggestion, sent with this instruction, and I said you might think about [replacing Diem], we had tried to think who the heck we might get to be forceful enough and have enough backing in the country, constituency in the country, and we couldn't think of anybody. We had some names, but nobody would be even half as good as we thought Diem was. Because he worked like the devil, you know; he was a bachelor. He worked too much to delegate authority. I understand he worked about sixteen hours a day and

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never took any vacation or whatnot. I knew there was going to be one hell of a mess and it turned out to be worse than I thought it would be.

*Q: What was your reaction to the revelations that it was apparently an American initiative which started that ball rolling down that hill?*

DURBROW: I didn't doubt it from what I knew already and from what I'd heard after I left, that he wasn't democratic enough. Now, I want to make this clear, and I want to say it whether anybody likes it or not. We are completely wonderful in our thoughts about everybody having all the four freedoms, all the civil rights and all the ten commandments and the original ten Constitutional amendments. It's a beautiful thought and I hope it works in every country, but it can't. It just can't work. Today in the world there are about fourteen countries that have really practiced democracy in our sense of the word that the authority has changed hands by a fairly honest secret balloting process. Only about fourteen left. Latin America doesn't count; Eastern Europe doesn't count; Germany doesn't count—I mean, since the .... Take the day of the Soviet revolution in 1917. From 1917 to date, there are about fourteen countries that have changed their governments by the ballot process, by the secret ballots and freedom of the press and so forth. They're wonderful thoughts and they work when they work, but to try to say we must have Diem or the generals in the Argentine or wherever it is, Duarte in El Salvador today, [to tell them], "You have free elections or else we won't back them up any mere," it's a beautiful thought and I wish it were practical, but it isn't.

So I resisted all these ideas about these free elections and I said, "Well we have to go through the motions." And the May 2 ones were, for that part of the world, pretty good. [He] had a few opposition token things, and people went to the ballot box. Now, Ky, on the other hand, when he had his election in 1964-65—I've forgotten when.

*Q: September 1966 I think.*

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DURBROW: 1966, yes, yes, sorry. But when the Buddhists boycotted it—I want to get that on the record: Vietnam is not a Buddhist country, never has been a Buddhist country and can't be, unless they boot a bunch of them in. About 10 per cent of the population in Vietnam were Buddhists. About 10 per cent were Catholics. There were the Montagnards, a million of same. The census out there is very elastic. Nobody else had one, really. The Chinese are about two million, and in my day out there, there were about fourteen million in South Vietnam. And there were the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao and the Binh Xuyen who got wiped out. There were the other Buddhists—the Cambodian Buddhists, Mahayana, what do they call it?

*Q: Mahayana ?*

DURBROW: Mahayana, yes. And most of the population, about 40 per cent of the population, are synergistic religion. It's a composite. It's a mixture of Confucianism, Taoism, some tenets of Buddhism—but very few tenets of Buddhism—ancestor worship and When the Halberstams and the rest of the boys would get this telegram, this telephone call that Thich Quang Duc is going to burn himself up at Forty-second and Broadway in Saigon, he's going to speak on Tu Do Street, they'd all go over there with a camera. And we had the impression that this dirty, mean old Catholic Diem—and I'm not a Catholic myself—was persecuting these nice, poor Buddhist people. It was just the best bunch of propaganda and undermining operations you can think of.

*Q: What do you suppose was motivating those Buddhists who immolated themselves?*

DURBROW: Well, I think what started the thing probably—and this happened while I was there, just before I left, on Buddha's birthday in 1961 up in Hue they had this march. They weren't supposed to parade as Buddhists per se, and they did and somebody in the militia or the civil guard shot and killed quite a few of them. That gave them the martyrs, and it was from that time on that the Buddhists tried to get this publicity and things of that kind. I wasn't there when it was going on, but they were just so wrong that it was a Buddhist

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country and this dirty old Catholic—he was very tolerant of religion. He knew the difficulties that he was having as being basically a Catholic, and a very devout one.

*Q: How did you read the disorders in the cities during that summer of 1963, the so-called Buddhist troubles?*

DURBROW: They were all contrived, all contrived, I think probably by the disinformation department in Moscow that induced these guys to do it. The Viet Cong, the Viet Minh, the rest of these people, the NPLA in Angola, those are all—the SWAPO in Namibia right today—that, Moscow started backing and applauding and praising SWAPO in 1964 in Pravda and Izvestia — which I read all the time, one of my sins. And they go on to these things and it works, and they kept people to give them some supports, supplies, munitions. Well, they found this Buddhist group after the shooting up in Hue and said, “Hey, we can disrupt this whole doggone thing down there. Let's get going and use them.” And I don't know. That's the way it operates, I know from other experiences.

*Q: The Tonkin Gulf incident—and I know you were not there—*

DURBROW: Yes.

*Q: But of course everybody at the time and since has put some kind of interpretation on it if only to explain it to themselves, and the one that mystifies me—and I have no reason to think that you know more about this than anybody else, but I want to ask you—what motivated the North Vietnamese in that incident? I have never heard a good explanation, not that I've asked everybody.*

DURBROW: Well, again, I get back to what I started to talk about earlier, that we don't understand what a war of national liberation is all about. And your other sources that said this was what they hoped to do by political means and we forced them to come with force, that is just for the birds. It's happened all over the damn place, in Cuba, Vietnam, El Salvador, South Yemen, the Pathet Lao in Laos. They concoct these local insurrections

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and they don't work, they've got to use more and more and more and more force. By that time, the boys weren't doing too well, their armed forces and whatnot. And they started blowing up our barracks down there in the South and things of that kind. They'd done some of that when I was there, you know, they did two bombings when I was there. Fortunately, nobody was really badly hurt, but they could have been. They tried to do it subtly. I'm talking about the communists, not just North Vietnam, the apparatus. Every once in a while they'd want to get a provocative thing going and they'd do it. It's not done by some battery commander that got drunk that day and pulled the lanyard and shelled the land just as far as whatever it is. I don't know exactly what the motivation was, but they were up there in their territory, of course, in the Gulf of Tonkin, and they were getting pretty in close I suppose, and they said, "Well, we've got to try to scare these guys off." I don't know. They're not afraid of doing a thing like that and when they feel they're not doing too well otherwise, why not try to shoot the works a bit?

By the way, I took my oldest son out to see the Verdun war battlefields out there, and we'd gone out for the weekend in Paris and were driving and I had the radio on and by golly, I heard about the Gulf of Tonkin. I cheered, "We're finally going to clean that place up."

*Q: How did you feel when the first combat troops went in? This would have been about a year and a half later.*

DURBROW: Yes. I was all for it. The one thing that I really don't like and still don't understand, and I blame basically McNamara for this, but the graduated response which turned out to be also—and I hadn't heard about this before until I got to NATO. When you're trying to do a graduated response on the trip wire and on the Iron Curtain and all that sort of business, [it] just threw me for a loop that we should think in those terms. You either go in to win or you don't go in. Now, if you're not going to go on to win with this graduated response and a little bit more, a little bit more, then the bombing pattern was wrong as hell. What Nixon did in 1971, mined the harbors and bombed the hell out of Haiphong and Hanoi, should have been done from the day we went in and then they'd

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understand you. The only thing they understand is force and we'll use it if necessary, and if we go in there using force, you've got to have plenty to make it work. We just put more and more troops in, more and more troops in without doing [anything. We should have] cut off their supplies. How the British did it in Malaysia, they just cut off all the supplies to the Chinese in the jungle. [There are] mostly Chinese down there, you know. The people that lived on the fringe of the forest, the jungle, they had to curfew at night, one person outside just got shot dead, period, no human rights, or they've got the wrong [person], woman or child, no MyLais. They just said, "You're out of bounds. Pfffft!" Of course, the My Lais are another thing.

*Q: Yes, there's a difference.*

DURBROW: Oh, well it wasn't at all. There were many My Lais in Vietnam, many, many, many. When you're working under conditions of that kind in a guerrilla operation in a jungle area, hostile, unfriendly area, you can't tell whose black pajamas are whose black pajamas, and you're taking you're company through. Suppose you're going to capture Hill 202 up there, you've got to go through some villages, you send word in, "Everybody in their quarters. If one person comes out, we're going to shoot." And when your troops have been hit before by kids being taught how to throw grenades, use small automatic weapons, so do women, when you've got people that have been trained to do that and they do it all the time, they've been doing it for a long time. Poor [William] Calley got caught and made a heel of, a terrible killer. God, that went on all the time, My Lais. You can't have Hague convention rules of war apply in a jungle, unconventional warfare type operation. You've got to be tougher than hell.

*Q: How would you answer the people who talk about hearts and minds in a war like this?*

DURBROW: Well, again, I say the hearts and minds of over four hundred thousand in the militia and the civil guard—five hundred thousand Vietnamese in the South were given arms by us through their government and they didn't turn around and shoot them in the

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other direction. They were dead against Hanoi, they were dead against the communist type of operation, they didn't want the Viet Cong, a lot of them had lived under it. So it's too bad if you get some women and children when you're going through a Viet Cong [area]. The Vietnamese understood. They did it. They weren't going to let their boys get killed because there might be a woman who did or didn't have a gun and she was looking out of a window and she had a broomstick in her hand. You just shoot. This hearts and minds and this hearts and flowers, do-gooder stuff is beautiful, but when you're in a war, you've got to go in to win. The reason we didn't win this war and lost a hell of a lot was—I haven't got the paper I gave you on it; I can give it to you later, because I've got it xeroxed now. But I ended up by saying, quoting Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander of the North, "This is the model war of national liberation. If we don't win this one, we won't win any others. If we win this one, it's going to go wonderful for us and the imperialists will lose." And we have ever since.

We just don't understand what that damn system is. I'm working on a piece right now for a committee over here in the Senate to explain where terrorism fits into this thing. Because way down the line in there it's a tool they use to make a war of national liberation work, or in countries like Italy or France or Germany where they have a stabilized, western type parliamentary government, to try to get their communist party into the government in cabinet positions by showing the people that the present government can't maintain law and order. People get shot in the streets in Italy or wherever it is and grenades thrown there and the Prime Minister gets captured and killed, [Aldo] Moro. "Gee whiz, these guys are no damn good. We'd better try to confuse issues, get their people disgruntled with their own present government," and then by using the ballot box, we've got a nice communist party in Italy, France, wherever it is, not in Germany. But then they get them in the government and start worming from within. And that's the kind of terrorism they use there.

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*Q: Have you—I'm sure you have—read or do you know the work of Douglas Pike on the Viet Cong?*

DURBROW: Oh yes, yes, sure.

*Q: What's your reading of him? He wrote a book later, I think, on the Viet Cong use of terror, specifically. Did that confirm your own observations?*

DURBROW: Yes, it did very definitely. Gosh, when they cut off hands, they cut off heads, they put a village chief's head on a pole, not always but very often, and they impressed the kids. They'd go in at night, "Join us or else." They didn't dare desert, although some two hundred thousand did desert by the way of the Viet Cong forces—Viet Minh, Viet Cong forces. So in the hearts and minds of people, they didn't think Diem was God's gift to manhood, womanhood and all the rest of the world, but they had more confidence in him than they did in letting the Viet Cong take over.

And that's one of the things our press does. I don't blame them. They've got to sell newspapers. And they've got to make it sensational for anybody to read it: "Three Women Killed Yesterday." Ah, terrible. "American Soldiers Shot" whoever it is, or our side shot somebody. The four nuns in El Salvador, who the hell shot them? I don't know, I don't think anybody knows. But why are four women out at an airport unless they had some real reason to be out there, coming back at ten o'clock at night on a patrolled road, a road that was ambushed on many other occasions, with roadblocks on it by one side or the other, driving down the main drag in a panel truck you can't see who was in it? They either went by a roadblock they didn't see or didn't stop, and the boys let go and they got them. "Oh, my God, we got some women. Look, they're nuns. Let's try to hide the bodies over here." It's too bad they're dead, they were courageous women, but they were foolish to go down a road in a place where they operate at night. The guerrillas work at night as well as the other people.



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We got ourselves all hot and bothered about these little bit of things. Our FBIs were saying all this time about whether this bullet came from this gun. Too bad the women are dead, but why the hell were they going down that road at that time of night? Too bad they were killed, it's terrible, but I don't think anybody has even suggested that it was done deliberately, their ambush was just to get those four American women, whether the rightists or the leftists or the middle got them. We get ourselves all mixed up in that sort of thing. So I hope we can get more realism of what's going on in these various operations. A war of national liberation's working like a charm for our Soviet friends. Vietnam was one of them.

End of interview